

Gender Fluid Perspectives and Language in Deena Mohamed's Graphic Novel *Shubeik Lubeik*

The Egyptian graphic novel trilogy *Shubeik Lubeik* is set in an alternate-universe-Cairo, where wishes are circulated inside cans or bottles and can be bought at a street corner kiosk. The visual and linguistic means used by Deena Mohamed to represent the fluid gender identity of Nūr, one of the main characters, articulate alternative possibilities of being in the world and *queer futurities*, where gender exists outside binaries.

Fantasy as playground for gender expressions

The universe of *Shubeik Lubeik* presents itself as a playground for experimenting with different gender expressions because the inhabitants of that world are already used to people who look very different, people who have extra arms, and extra legs, or different genders.

Readers will notice that even the kiosk owner Šukrī knows how to address Nūr and seems to easily adapt his speech (see figure 2). Deena Mohamed explains that it is also thanks to the magical element of the *Shubeik Lubeik* universe that Nūr's gender expression can be fluid: "This guy [Šukrī] has grown up with people who are blue, with hooves, with wings and stuff. He thinks it's a wish, like it is a wish problem. He just doesn't know, he doesn't care, you know?"

"Gender is actually irrelevant to the story. It is true that for me this is part of the character backstory, but I also knew that because I am publishing it in Egypt, this cannot be the central part and I cannot explain it too much. So, I wanted it to work as a story where if you know that Nūr is non-binary it makes sense, but if you don't, the story is the same. I actually wanted it to reach the end where someone thinks, oh, was Nūr a boy or a girl? And they don't know, and it's fine."»
Deena Mohamed, 5.1.2022

Findings

Gender is rooted grammatically in the Arabic language, with gender indicators attached to nouns, verbs and adjectives, especially when the speech is directed to a second person. In *Shubeik Lubeik Vol. 2*, Deena Mohamed succeeds in dis-gendering the language and thus blurring the gender of the main protagonist Nūr by dismissing existing gendered structures:

- For the first half of the book, Deena Mohamed avoids pronouns in a sentence, and uses verbs that are conjugated in the same way in the second person singular, whether in the masculine or feminine form. In addition, while in Egyptian Arabic you would usually use the gendered active participle to say "I don't know" (*miš 'ārif* or *miš 'ārifā*), Nūr exclusively says *ma 'arafš*, in a gender-neutral way (see figure 1).
- In some instances, throughout the novel where persevering this intention was the trickiest, the author resorted to a particular Egyptian habit to indicate social intimacy, by addressing an interlocutor using the 2. person plural (see figure 2). Deena Mohamed comments: "The relaxed use of the plural pronoun to address the singular second person came to my rescue, as I prefer that far more than the English 'they.'"

References:

- All quotes are retrieved from my interview with Deena Mohamed on Jan. 5th, 2022.
Muḥammad, Dīnā. *Šubbēk Lubbēk: al-Ġuz' at-Ṭānī*. Al-Qāhira: Markaz al-Maḥrūsa li 'l- Našr, 2019.
Muḥammad, Dīnā. *Shubeik Lubeik*. First American edition. New York: Pantheon Books, 2022.
Muñoz, Jose Esteban, et al. *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.



Figure 1: (Muhammad 2019), p. 42.



Figure 3: (Muhammad 2022), p. 176.



Figure 2: (Muhammad 2019), p. 98.



Figure 4: (Muhammad 2022), p. 234.